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ENGLISH IN THE SCHOOLS : A PARENT'S POINT-OF-VIEW.

There were two noteworthy articles on this subject in the first number of the *REVIEW*, one of which, at least, has awakened lively interest among educators. These papers doubtless, cover the ground, from the standpoint of a professor of English in college, and that of a high school principal.

There is, however, a third point of view, which teachers perhaps do not enough take into account. I mean that of the public at large—of parents who have at heart the education of their sons and daughters.

If it be asked what right such persons have to form any opinion on educational matters, the reply must be, that they have opportunities for acquaintance with pupils such as teachers do not enjoy. Scholars may even shine in the classroom, and give out bravely the indigested and indigestible matter with which they are often systematically stuffed, and yet reveal to those at home that they have no vital connection with the subject pursued. The youth speak of school matters, outside the recitation rooms, with unvarnished frankness—I am not referring to flippant, or to unjust criticism—and these judgments uttered in the household are one of the means by which parents estimate the inward growth. The language of children at home is their common speech. If the rules of grammar are not applied ; if the family letters are poorly written ; if rhetorical rules are forgotten when the ordeal of examination is over, friends at home, who are capable judges, understand. If, on the other hand, enthusiasm for reading is gained by a course in literature, if style is formed by it, parents have excellent opportunities to discover this. Those who follow boys and girls with sympathy and understanding, step by step through their school courses, are often better enabled to judge these courses as a whole, to note their excellencies and their deficiencies, and to see the development of mind, or where spirit is quenched, than are teachers whose acquaintance with their pupils is generally limited to one or two subjects.

As regards the schools, the public may be divided into three classes : first, those who are negative in their attitude, and this is

the largest class ; secondly, those who are superficial and insistent in their criticism ; thirdly, the interested, ordinarily intelligent portion of the people. This latter class is not the largest, but it is a growing, and a well-defined one. It has never tried its voice, so far as I know, in a united appeal for a change in any particular. Its members, however, have views much in unison upon school affairs, and their opinions, in any given locality, are not hard to discover.

People in general prefer to consider the public schools as preparatory to life, rather than preparatory to a university course. They are trying to demand that their children receive an education which shall be complete in itself, even if they leave school at the end of the secondary period. Hitherto little attention has been paid to this demand.

And in the one matter of English, this portion of the community has been troubled for years about the shameful neglect, and subordination of this the most important of studies. Nor has this criticism been suppressed. Certainly teachers in any given locality where English has been crowded out of sight, have heard scores of complaints of this nature. It is safe to say that conversation when upon school matters has largely taken this turn.

Much of the criticism may have degenerated into mere fault-finding with teachers and superintendents, and more of it into a chronic and indiscriminate condemnation of the Regents, in communities where the standards of scholarship are of their making. All this, and much more is probably true. But that there has been, and is, general dissatisfaction among intelligent parents with the results secured from the teaching of English in the schools, cannot be doubted.

Who is to blame? Perhaps the public does not know ; for it is results more than methods and remedies of which it is competent to judge. But I do not think the more intelligent part of the public are disposed to lay the blame to any considerable extent upon the teachers. In this State, at any rate, instructors are bound to the system in which they find themselves. They have little or no voice in determining courses of study, or the time that shall be allotted to different subjects. And the results which they seek to secure are almost of necessity those called for by the authorities under whom they do their work.

Does the responsibility rest, then, with superintendents of schools, or with local Boards of Education? In either case to a limited degree only, at least as respects the State of New York, and for the same reasons alleged above concerning teachers. These officers, so far as they are under the control of the Regents, are a part of the great machine ; and they must grind according to its methods such grists as it is fitted to turn out. It is not likely, indeed, that superintendents are conscious of being thus hampered ; I have yet to hear of one who acknowledges this. That superintendents are conservative men is a necessity of their position ; of course any change in the present school system would involve no end of difficulties for those in authority. Moreover, the money received from the Board of Regents constitutes no small part of the powerful hold which they have upon the schools. Consequently, the immense majority of the common-schools of this State use the Regents' examinations, only two having abolished their authority.

Nevertheless, the public, I believe is, and has long been, hostile to the Regents' examinations, so far at least as studies in language and literature are concerned. It believes that the English branches have been killed by teaching with reference to those requirements ; especially because studies are considered finished when examinations have been passed, even when it is evident that the subjects are not understood. The test has cost too much nervous expenditure, and the verdict rendered has not always been just.

I have examined the courses of study of one of the New York schools which has braved public opinion and discarded the Regents. About eleven years ago the superintendent recommended in his annual report that the examinations be discontinued. In the report for 1882, he gives his reasons for this change. In that for 1883, after the unanimous adoption of his suggestion, he says, "I have clearly defined my views as to how the schools may be improved by being out from under the restraints imposed by the examinations. It would be a confession of weakness that they are essential to success. . . . While greater freedom is secured in the selection of subjects of study and in the methods of dealing with them, more intelligent requirements will be made as to the pupils' attainments therein, before promotion will be accorded. More labor and diligence will be demanded of pupils,

teachers and superintendent, but it will be inspired by an immediate, personal interest in the work, The interrogation point has become too prominently the emblem of the public school. The tendency of teachers to teach, and of scholars to study, for examination results, will be in a great measure avoided." The 1891 report is an evidence that English is greatly advanced, and that the instruction given is enthusiastic and painstaking. Grammar is introduced into the first and second terms of the High School, and, also, a course in reading. Rhetoric is given in both terms of the second year. To English and English Literature are devoted four terms of twenty weeks each—two years. All these subjects are prescribed. Great stress is laid upon the character of the reading in all the grades. I wish there were place to give a synopsis of "English" as required in that school in the third year. The entire attention is given to, I. "A study of words preparatory to the study of literature." II. To the critical study of one poet.

My attention was attracted to the primary department of a western school. On observing the delightful character of the instruction given in the lower grades, I was led to look into the higher—particularly to see how English was dealt with. Thus I discovered the most thorough course in English—in point of time and quality—which I have ever known about. Five recitations per week are given to English study throughout the four years—and the course is required for the first three years. The last year's course is English Literature and Themes, and is required before graduation. I mention this school not merely because the English course is complete. After comparing it with the courses of several of the schools of New York state—selected at random—I determined to find out if anything of the nature of the Board of Regents prescribed, so to speak, the courses of study. I was told that all the examinations were given by local teachers, under the direction of the superintendent and his assistants—that tests were made out for the school and given them, but not for the purpose of promotion from grade to grade. In English, in the high school, the final examination is given by the teacher of English with the approval of the principal of the high school.

While the regents' certificate may be an evidence of proficiency in every other subject, I can not see how the best results to be gained from the study of English literature can be revealed through

examination. Furthermore, the teaching of literature which presupposes a regents' examination at the end, must forfeit much of its power to kindle enthusiasm. It is often tongue-tied. A student may have an examinable knowledge of "The Ancient Mariner," or of a dozen authors and their works, which are required in his course—an exact knowledge *about them*—and not have the faintest conception of the quickening and inspiring function of literature. There is a decided objection to the very comprehensiveness of the English literature courses. When an attempt is made to improve these courses, the stress seems to be put upon enlarging them—on covering more ground—as if already too much were not attempted in that direction. What is wanted, is time—time to drink deeply—time to grow up into what is presented. What does Day mean when he says, in his "Science of Education," "The preparatory studies, looking to professional or higher literary life, should be preparatory, not finishing in their proper tendency and effect"?

A general knowledge of the authors and their works is, of itself, no real benefit. It is a knowledge which will pass away unless a taste for good literature is engendered by it. And, more than all, it is conducive to shallowness—intellectual conceit. Students who go no further than the High-schools, and have "passed" English literature, are in danger of concluding that they know all there is to know about it, when perhaps they have not a particle of enthusiasm for a single author studied. If they have not, the chances are that they will henceforth avoid the master minds. If such students—those who have skimmed the surface—go on to the higher seats of learning, they are not so well prepared for a course in literature which covers the same ground as if they had been taught to delight in even one author.

Where is the professor of English who would not prefer a mind which had begun to grow at one point, to one too stuffed with facts to show signs of life? It is not possible in one year of English literature to cover the whole ground and to know one author as one should be known.

All honor to the Board of Regents for what they may have accomplished in the earlier school history in elevating the standard of teaching. Nor can it be doubted that their supervision still has great influence for good in that direction. It is but just to acknowledge, moreover, that this board has recently

effected a change in the course in English which has not yet been sufficiently tested. On inquiry I find that the change in the 1891 syllabus did not bear much fruit in many of the schools till the present school year. It has not yet borne full fruit. Elementary English and Advanced English have been substituted for English Grammar ; English Composition and Rhetoric, for Rhetoric. American Literature has been introduced as distinct from English Literature. A course in English reading has also been recommended. A new credential is given for completion of a course in which special attention is paid to English. All this "in response to a clear demand." I have examined the courses of a high school which uses the Regents' tests, and find that previous to the year 1892-3, there was no English in the first year (Academic course) ; Rhetoric only one term of the second year, and English Literature only in the last year. Notice the conservative change. The prescribed course puts English Composition in place of Rhetoric—and the last year is divided between English and American Literature, while there are two new electives, Advanced English in the first year, and a course in English reading in the third. I am told, however, that more students in that particular school are taking English than ever before. Upon looking over the improved course in this branch as prescribed by the last Regents' syllabus, and, in fact, upon studying the various English examination papers of several years, one feels that nothing is left out. Perhaps, however, the improvement chiefly consists of adding to the pressure already upon teachers and scholars. If thorough examinations help to make thorough English scholars, these examinations should do the work. And if there is any virtue in the Regents' tests, pupils should be better educated in English within a few years. We shall see what the results will be.

Notwithstanding this tirade against the Board of Regents, I do not believe it is just to lay all the blame for the neglect of English study at their door. "Appalling deficiencies in English" are not found only in N. Y. State schools. But the mere fact that not they alone are lacking—that every school which overdoes examinations is also at fault—proves that there is another root to the difficulty. If instructors can prove that frequent examinations are a test of proficiency, and if the Board of Regents can improve upon the teachers' examinations, then they are a necessity, otherwise not.

It has been said that "English Literature well taught for four years in the secondary schools, would have more humanizing effect than all the linguistic study of Greek and Latin." I agree with this. But I hold that if we are to get the full benefit of English Literature, four years are not enough. This seems to me an additional reason why students of the secondary schools have little understanding, and less appreciation of English study because their natural inclinations are vitiated by early neglect or by abuse. Leave out of the question those whose education ends with the schools. If pupils are to be trained to get the best results from a college course in English, we must begin with them in the primary departments. Then, we shall educate a class of students who will delight the hearts of the teachers of English. I am more and more impressed with the fact that education from beginning to end, should be a natural, hence a delightful growth. Much of our present pressure and waste is because we seek to hasten growth. Day says of education what we know must be true, "The thorough, scientific way is as a rule the shortest, easiest, only satisfactory way."

The amount of choice literature which small children can appreciate, provided it be given them by an appreciative teacher, is amazing to those who have never thought of it. By memorizing, by reading, and by hearing read during the lower grades prose and poetry of the highest order, much of the pressure is taken off the high school courses, and taste is developed in the most natural way.

The mere prescribed reading of poetry in the lower or higher schools will not have the desired effect. Indeed, the requiring of a full course of reading in the secondary schools has its dangers. Such requirement might lead to even more cramming, and consequent barrenness.

A mother told a story which illustrates this. She opened the door one evening upon her boy, a youth of seventeen, whose posture and expression were that of agonized determination. She glanced over his shoulder and discovered one of Hawthorne's works. Promptly the book was slammed down with a "Thank heaven, I've waded through that stuff." Two moments later he was comfortably seated in a big chair, reading a light novel. That boy read the prescribed masterpiece. His will power made him conquer his inclinations. He was a fair scholar, and he

usually "got through" his examinations. Undoubtedly enthusiasm for the best literature, the cultivation to be gained from it is mostly caught from the teacher's rightly feeling and understanding the reading—only thus will he be able to impart his enthusiasm.

Place one teacher in each school who appreciates the influence of poetry upon the heart and mind, and is able to communicate his appreciation, and you will see growth in all the departments of that school.

It is not merely that taste may be developed, or that life may be enriched, that I urge an early and a continuous familiarity with poetry. If we are to make expression—clear, clean, vigorous expression, in speech and in writing—a part of school training, we should encourage the young to imbibe deeply of the best poetry.

What has been said about the teaching of literature, either early or late, does not imply that teachers of English should be more remarkable than teachers of the sciences. They should have a deep and inspiring love for the work, and feel that enthusiasm created is as important as facts stored away. "The great end of literature is not to inform but to inspire." The ideal teaching of English in the secondary schools would be to have all that comes under the head of English study supervised by one teacher. Then the impress of one mind would be upon all the teaching, and the development of the pupils all along the line could be estimated—a very important matter. One teacher could easily attend to more English than is now taught in most high schools.

Perhaps no one subject taught in the schools has met with as poor success as has Grammar. It is uninteresting to most minds, and as taught has little application to speech. I am coming to the belief that it has been placed too early in the school course—that it should be a High school subject. One thing seems very certain—correct speech would be more readily secured in the schools if the attention was centered upon applying to speech the most common grammatical rules. Teachers are agreed that the teaching of writing is summed up in, "Constant practice under judicious criticism." Perhaps the teaching of grammar might be thus defined—early, constant, continuous correction of spoken language from primary through the secondary schools. Such a

supervision of speech would make greater demands upon teachers of all subjects. But, if teachers themselves through the several grades were exact in the use of language, this would not be an impossibility. The day has come when not only school teachers should be thus cultivated ; every instructor should be a lover of the English language, and so appreciate the necessity for cultivating the love for correct speech, and exact expression in writing as well, that every child shall grow into the same veneration for the mother tongue.

If the science of grammar is taught too early what shall we say of rhetoric? Rhetoric is the "proper consummation" of Grammar. Would it not be better both for those going to college and for those who will have no later cultivation in composition, if the difficulties of Rhetoric were to have small attention, and the time were employed in training exact, simple, dignified writers of English. Young people, I believe, are often discouraged about rhetorical work, and come to dislike it, because the cultivation of the art does not proceed naturally. Allow pupils to write upon what they understand rather than upon what they look up—what is beyond them. Then acquisition and expression will proceed hand in hand, and education is upon solid ground. The advice that pupils each day summarize in writing one study pursued—taking each study in turn—is most excellent. They will thus grow into writing something when they have something to say.

If "the chief utility of rhetorical study lies in its application to the style," and the student is to paraphrase and restate his models, literature certainly should not be placed only in the last year, and I would urge that caution be used in the selection of the literature thus dissected. The literature which kindles enthusiasm and gives insight must leave its impress upon the style. Allow some authors free sway.

At first thought the attack upon English teaching in the schools is disheartening. But it should be remembered that all strengthening, establishing processes are a sort of evolution ; become permanent in form by what they cast off, dying to that which conceals and confines. Ours has been an age of scientific conquest, and speculative research ; the age of construction and invention ; the age of the realistic novel ; the age when the English speaking people have had little place for poetry ; the age of feverish

haste ; the age of the specialist, when in order to get a foothold in any one direction concentration in one line has been an essential. The very significance of many things formerly valued and essentially vital has been lost sight of. It is not strange that what is termed "the scientific conceptions of life" have affected the schools. The pendulum has swung its full limit in one direction. We are awakening to the discovery of our mistakes.

Cynthia Morgan St. John.

CORRECTION.

On p. 413, September SCHOOL REVIEW, Professor Merrill is made to say "to teach Latin as it deserves to be taught and ought to be taught *is* better than to teach it as it ought not to be taught." The MSS. read "harder," not "better," and we agree with Professor Merrill in thinking that it would have been well to follow the MSS.

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